

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Guide to Compassionate Conversations

This guide details eight keys to having meaningful and compassionate conversations about sensitive issues. First, watch the following two minute video, a partnership between the Ignatian Solidarity Network and Faith in Public Life: <https://bit.ly/35C3C4W>

8 Keys to Compassionate Conversations About Sensitive Issues:

1. Get Centered.
2. Acknowledge fears people may have.
3. Avoid putting people on the defensive.
4. Invite people to reflect.
5. Be a model of change.
6. Treat others how you want to be treated.
7. Listen: Be open to changing your own mind.
8. Commit to multiple conversations.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to be in the right state of mind when having conversations about sensitive topics? What can happen if you try to have a conversation while distracted or stressed?
2. How can you effectively name fears that people may have? Why is it important to do this before even starting the conversation? Can you name your own fears?
3. What kind of language is important to avoid when having compassionate conversations? What words can you use to avoid making people defensive or judged?
4. What kinds of phrases can you use to invite people to be reflective and think critically? How can you gently redirect a conversation if you or another person start to get angry?
5. Can you think of a time that you changed your opinion about a sensitive topic? What was that like? How have your beliefs evolved, and what made that possible?
6. Why is treating others how you would want to be treated vitally important in difficult conversations? How can tone change the mood and energy of a conversation? How do you model civility, humility, sincerity, and respect in conversations?
7. Why is it important to be open to changing your mind and to understand other people's views, even if they are misguided? How can you show the other person that you are actively listening to what they have to say?
8. Why is having multiple conversations important when discussing sensitive topics? How can building a relationship with someone help when sustaining conversations?

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Examples of Implementing Each Key Factor

Get Centered

- Make a mental checklist to see if you are in a good state of mind: Am I well fed and well rested?
- If you are not centered, ask: "Can we have this conversation another day? I am not focused and I want to give my full and undivided attention to this conversation."

Acknowledge Fears

- I hear you saying _____, is that an area you have fears around?
- Example: "I hear you saying that you believe immigrants are taking jobs. Is that an area you have fears around? Tell me more." Share your perspective only after really listening to the other person, even if you believe they are misinformed.

Avoid Putting People on the Defensive

- Words to avoid: xenophobe, misogynist, racist, ignorant etc.
- Avoid starting statements with "you" if possible. Example: "You are a part of the problem because you think that climate change isn't happening."
- Example of bringing someone along: "I know that you enjoy camping and wonder if you've noticed any changes in climate patterns since you were a child."

Invite People to Reflect

- "When we take a step back and really think about it..."
- Example: "When we take a step back and really think about it, we can agree that healthcare is a human right. We just have different thoughts about the best way to accomplish this."

Be a Model of Change

- "A time when I changed my opinion about a similar issue was..."
- Example: "When I was younger, I supported the death penalty; however, after listening to interviews with innocent inmates from death row, I had a change of heart."

Treat Others How You Want to be Treated

- Consider: Would I want someone to use this language with me? Would I want someone to use these gestures or tone?
- If you feel strong emotions rising, intentionally try to speak slower and lower your voice. This can have a calming effect that can help to regulate your emotions.

Be Open to Changing Your Own Mind

- Ask yourself: Am I genuinely listening to what the other person is saying, or am I already formulating an argument or response?
- Ask a question or try to summarize what they've said to make sure you understood them before making your next point.

Commit to Multiple Conversations

- Is there a family member or friend that you'd like to have sustained conversation with about a particular topic?
- Commit to checking in with that person regularly to build your relationship and to be able to enter into the conversation at a deeper level.